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ABSTRACT

This document provides background for those looking to establish workplace mentoring or buddy systems. It touches briefly on the other two legs of an effective workplace preparation program, which are orientation and on-the-job training. These six steps for setting up a mentoring system are described: recruitment, flexibility, training, written materials, new worker orientation, and team meetings. (YLB)

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How To Set up a Workplace Mentoring System

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How to set up a workplace mentoring system

Introduction

In previous eras, people often got their jobs through a strong connection to the workplace. Young men showed up and got hired at a plant where their fathers, uncles, and neighbors also worked. Workplaces were often quite segregated. Women and people of color had little access to good jobs; those who did get hired rarely were privy to the unwritten rules of the workplace, and they often didn't last long.

Today, due to family dispersion, movement of the children of blue collar workers into the middle class, anti-discrimination laws, and low unemployment, employers are turning increasingly to workers who have not traditionally been part of their workplaces. Formerly all-white manufacturing plants are hiring more people of color. Formerly all-male construction sites are hiring more women. And all workplaces are less able to rely, as they once did, on references from family members for hiring.

These are changes for the better. There is less discrimination in hiring than there once was, and women and minorities have greater opportunities to enter well-paying jobs. Unfortunately, these new entrants experience a high turnover rate. There are many reasons for this: outright discrimination and harassment; fewer supports at home to keep the new workers on the job; and problems with transportation, child care and other services. Employers can not always resolve these problems. However, employers and incumbent workers can help the new workers adjust to the workplace, and the workplace adjust to them, by setting up mentoring systems that do formally what was once often done informally.

In the past, when men obtained entry-level jobs in a plant where their uncles, fathers, and neighbors already worked, they knew what to expect. Their friends would warn them about the rigors of the probation period, about which supervisors to be more deferential to, about how to make rate, and about how to avoid injuries. Furthermore, incumbent workers or line supervisors who might be inclined to haze the new guy would usually take it easy on their friends' sons and nephews. But for today's women and minorities who lack this built-in support system in the workplace, beginning the job is much harder. Nobody is there to reassure them that life gets easier after probation, to tell them how to deal with the tough third-shift supervisor, and to give them little tips about how to perform more safely and efficiently. Worse still, nobody is there to tell supervisors and incumbent workers to ease up on them. Finally, existing staff who might resent women and blacks in the workplace are likely to be even tougher on these untraditional workers, and to engage in full-scale harassment. When this happens, non-traditional workers often don't know where to turn for support.

Employers and unions can vastly improve this situation by setting up mentoring systems which do formally for all new workers what uncles, fathers, and neighbors once did informally for their friends and family. Mentors, sometimes called buddies, help prepare new workers before they start the job, act as liaisons when new workers have difficulty

with incumbent workers or supervisors, help resolve minor problems in the workplace and are there to answer questions.

This document provides some background for those looking to establish mentoring or buddy systems. The Center on Wisconsin Strategy compiled this document after reviewing the experiences of the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative (MJI) and the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP). The MJI is a seven-year initiative to connect central city workers to family supporting jobs in Milwaukee. WRTP, the largest sectoral training consortium in the country, runs the MJI's manufacturing project. Some of the language reflects the fact that this plan was designed for a manufacturing workplace; however it is easily adaptable to other types of jobs. It is not a plan written in stone; in fact it will work best if you modify it for your workplace, inviting worker, supervisory, and human resources staff input. But it does provide some guidelines to assist you in tailoring a solution that fits your workplace.

Before beginning, it is important to note that mentoring is only one leg of an effective workplace preparation program. In addition to a mentoring system, manufacturers should establish orientations for all new workers, and should provide on-the-job training (OJT) for their employees. This document may touch briefly on functions which would better be provided in the orientation or training. While some functions can be accomplished through any of the three processes, others are only appropriate in one of the contexts. General job preparation and answering questions can occur anywhere. Nevertheless, mentoring, OJT, and orientation differ in the following ways:

- **Orientation** is a one-time event designed to introduce newcomers to the company. All basic information should be provided here, even if some of it is repeated in OJT or mentoring. Both trainers and mentors should participate in orientations.

- **On-the-Job Training** is the only appropriate venue for direct training on the machines needed for a particular job.

- **Mentoring** is the best place to address general workplace questions and to try to ensure general comfort with the job.

The three components are complementary but the distinctions between them are important. For example, while the most important responsibility of the trainers is to convey how to use machines correctly and safely, the mentors' most important job is to make the newcomers feel welcome. A stern older white man may make a perfectly good trainer for a young African-American woman, but we'd seek another woman or another person of color as her mentor. It is important to have separate individuals fulfill these functions, so that if newcomers have problems with their trainers, they can turn to friendly faces for help in resolving the situation.

Setting up a Mentoring System

Establishing a mentoring system includes the following six steps:

Recruitment

Recruit incumbent worker volunteers to help their new colleagues adjust to the company and the job. The best peer advisors or mentors are workers with the following characteristics:

- Ability to get along well with co-workers.
- Comfort with the job.
- Comfort with diversity.
- Ability to listen, empathize, and communicate.
- Experience with worker organizations such as unions.
- Good relationships with management.

Employers and unions should commit to trying to recruit at least one mentor on every shift and in every department where new workers will be placed. One incumbent worker may be able to be an effective buddy for up to ten new workers, but the ideal system would have a lower ratio

Flexibility

Those who volunteer to work as mentors are increasing your retention rate, speeding up new workers' adjustment time, reducing your turnover costs, and making your company more productive. Allow them to have a little less time on the line so that they can speak to the new workers. Recognize that they are reducing the stress on your human resources department but that they may require some flexibility in doing their new job well. All peer advisors will need time off to complete some of their new commitments, including:

- Receiving training of their own before any new worker training begins, in order to learn how to be a peer advisor.
- Meeting the new workers before they begin and describing the workplace to them.
- Taking time off during shifts in the course of the new workers' first month on the job to talk to new workers and identify problems.
- Taking occasional time off during the subsequent two months to deal with problems.

- Using the company telephone to contact workers who are late or absent.

Training

Train the new peer mentors. Work with management and union representatives in your plant to design a training program that might include the following components:

- How to describe the workplace to new workers.
- How to make new workers comfortable on the job.
- How to ensure that new workers know what's expected.
- How to identify and resolve problems faced by new workers.
- How to help other incumbent workers deal with diversity and other issues raised by new workers.

Written Materials

Create a written document explaining plant rules and procedures and other important things to know about the workplace. This may already be part of your orientation program. It should not be a long employee manual filled with legal language. Instead, it should be a concise document that a new worker can easily read and refer back to. This should include:

- Safety information.
- Information on the union or other employee organizations.
- Plant rules and regulations.
- Consequences of rule violations.
- Disciplinary procedures.
- Contact people for assistance with problems.
- General information on the workplace—products produced, role of different parts in products, who's who, supervisor names, union representative names, etc.
- Needed vocabulary.
- Logistical details—parking, buses, timing, routines, etc.

New Worker Orientation

Work with the peer mentors and the trainers to plan and provide orientations for new workers that include:

- A thorough plant tour conducted by at least one management representative and one worker representative.
- A clear, critical description of the job, from the worker's perspective, focusing on what makes it challenging and what makes it rewarding. This is in part designed to dissuade applicants who are not likely to stay in the job.
- A discussion of important rules, why they exist, and the consequences of rule violations.
- Orientation to what they will be producing, what it is used for, and what their contribution is.
- A warning about safety concerns and a clear explanation of what to do in an emergency.
- An introduction to the direct supervisor and other management representatives.
- An introduction to union representatives and an invitation to the next union meeting.
- A map of emergency exits and phones.

Team Meetings

Establish a mentor team to meet once or twice a year to:

- Resolve problems the mentors themselves face.
- Brainstorm on how to improve performance as mentors.
- Review reasons why new employees have left the company.
- Propose ways to improve retention.
- Recruit new mentors to expand the program.

The above laundry list may make the job of a mentor seem daunting and difficult. It shouldn't. While it may sound complicated, what mentors are really designed to do is what any friend would do for a new colleague: prepare them for what to expect, sympathize and help out when things go wrong, and introduce them to other workers. It can be as simple as giving them someone to sit with the first day in the cafeteria. As

helpful as introducing them to another worker who lives on their block, to see about arranging a carpool. As reassuring as letting a new worker know that her particular supervisor is always gruff until he gets to know you. It need not take long and it doesn't take much. But it can make a world of difference.

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